

Japan

Carolyn S. Stevens, *The Beatles in Japan: Media, Culture and Social Change in Asia*

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When the Beatles rose to worldwide fame in the mid-1960s, they completed a series of international tours that would take them not only to the United States but also to venues in Europe and Asia. Their first tour to Japan in 1966 created a tight bond between the band and the Japanese public that survives to this day. During my many visits to Japan in the early 2000s, I frequented a large nightclub in Tokyo that featured a Japanese band that played Beatles songs before packed audiences, night after night. Several Beatles songs such as “Yesterday” still resonate at virtually every karaoke event where English songs are sung.

Carolyn S. Stevens opens her study with a detailed analysis of the Beatles’ brief yet chaotic visit to Tokyo in late June 1966. She contrasts the Tokyo visit with the next stops for the Beatles 1966 tour in Manila and later in Memphis. Later chapters include a detailed portrayal of the intense relationship between Yoko Ono and John Lennon, as well as Paul McCartney’s and George Harrison’s later Japanese tours featuring the warm reception that the ex-Beatles and their musical legacy have received over the years.

Stevens contends that the Beatles’ 1966 visit to Japan played a key role in the country’s dramatic rise in notoriety on the world scene. This was the time when Japan sought to open itself to the world as its increased prosperity and “economic miracle” were becoming evident. Two events gained world attention: the hugely successful 1964 Olympics and the 1966 Beatles tour. Stevens states that “The Beatles’ concerts in Tokyo contributed to the construction of a new Japanese national identity and introduced Japan as a potential market to UK and US music producers, broadening the country’s transnational cultural links” (ii).

The 1966 tour created a frenzy in Tokyo. The Beatles’ arrival brought huge crowds to the airport and hotel where they stayed. It was a security nightmare involving thousands of police and officials who sought to control the crowds. The concerts at the Budōkan emerged as a screaming fest for young women who drowned out the music. Mishima Yukio, who attended one of the concerts, later wrote:

In short, I couldn’t tell if the Beatles were any good or not. Furthermore, the screams burst out as soon as they started singing and I could hardly hear the music. The only song I could barely manage to hear was something or other about yesterday. (65)

There were also demonstrations by right-wing groups that denounced the Beatles’ degenerate songs and alleged immoral behavior.

The Beatles' next stops in Manila and Memphis also drew huge crowds. In Manila, a breakdown in security led to physical attacks on the "Fab Four" as they attempted to make their way back to the airport at the end of their visit. Stevens writes:

Connections between the Tokyo, Manila and Memphis concerts can be made when looking at how the controversies emerged: Each social setting contained various ideas of social propriety, arising from ideas about morals and/or religion which clashed with the values that the Beatles purportedly stood for. The Asian and the US legs of their 1966 tour threw into relief the darker consequences of the Beatles phenomenon, for the musicians themselves, their fans, and their critics. Pop music, which had lurched into a new transnational phase thanks to Beatlemania, was now a conduit of personal and public views about international relations and cultural diplomacy. (96)

One of the deepest associations between the Beatles phenomenon and Japanese culture and society is the intense relationship between John Lennon and Yoko Ono. Stevens contends that the very public partnership between them matured the ties between the Beatles and Japan and keeps their legacy alive in Japan. Stevens boldly states that instead of being the woman who broke up the Beatles in 1970, Ono has herself transformed into one of the remaining "torchbearers" who protect and even extend the Beatles' legacy in Japan and elsewhere (98).

Stevens concludes her work by analyzing the visits of individual Beatles to Japan since the 1970s. She focuses on Paul McCartney's arrest in 1980, when customs officials found a large bag of hash in his suitcase. McCartney was held briefly in a Tokyo prison until charges were eventually dropped. His case was closely followed by the Japanese media and drew sympathy from the Japanese public. McCartney later returned for a well received concert tour. Ringo Starr and George Harrison also made successful solo visits to Japan.

The book's best chapter involves the relationship between John and Yoko. It is not only a careful study on this superficially odd relationship, but the author allows us to see the key ingredients that brought them together and kept their ties together even as John created an independent path for his life and music in the years leading up to his tragic death in December 1980. Stevens does a masterful job in introducing the reader to Yoko Ono's creative life before her marriage to Lennon.

Stevens's study of the Beatles in Japan is a joy to read. The book is very well-researched, clearly written, comprehensive in its detail, and richly illustrated. The high level of scholarship adds to the value of this book. The author gives equal attention to both the positive and negative aspects of the Beatles' intense relationship with the Japanese. Her coverage of the Beatles' 1966 tour brings a clear picture of the chaotic security nightmare their brief visit created. *The Beatles in Japan* will appeal to both the scholar and the general reader for its clarity and in-depth look at the "Fab Four" and their unique relationship with the Japanese public. It is also an important contribution to the growing field of pop culture in Japan.

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